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Educators Learn Ways to Impart Lessons of Slavery to Future Generations

By United Nations News

Posted online March 23, 2011

<http://www.un.org/>

From high schools in the Gambia and Portugal to pre-schools in South Africa and a university in the United States, hundreds of teachers and educators from around the world gathered "virtually" today through the assistance of the United Nations to learn about the best ways to teach future generations about slavery.

The one-day video conference, which brought together around 450 people at seven different sites worldwide, gave participants the opportunity to exchange the latest ideas, successes and strategies for teaching the subject at all levels of the education system.

The virtual gathering is one of a series of events being staged by the UN this week to mark the *International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, which will be formally observed on Friday. It follows the success of a similar event last year that was aimed at students.

Yvonne Acosta, the chief of education outreach in the UN's Department of Public Information (DPI), said the organizers hope that the video conference had a multiplier effect beyond the actual participants.

"We're hoping that in addition to the teachers [participating], they will take it back and share it with their students" for years to come, she said. "That's more than we would otherwise reach."

Based on feedback from today's event, the organizers -- who have been helped by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) - are considering staging similar events for educators on other subjects.

Professor Sir Hilary Beckles of the University of West Indies, considered one of the world's foremost experts in the field, told the UN News Centre that he can remember a time when teaching slavery was dismissed or marginalized, even within the academy.

"I think there was a tremendous amount of resistance," Professor Sir Hilary recalled, citing UNESCO's Slave Route Project -- created in 1994 to boost awareness about the issue -- as a turning point.

"That project brought legitimacy to the discourse. It broke the silence and gave confidence to a generation of scholars to move away from validating academic racism."

Another crucial factor, Professor Sir Hilary said, was the way that teachers re-framed the subject from explaining it as merely an economic institution to showing its cultural, social and personal effects.

"We started teaching the human side, the social side, the biographical side . . . and the world started to identify with their own stories."

The impact of the transatlantic slave trade lingers even today, more than a century after it ended, he noted, in the economic and power relations between countries and peoples.

"This is a subject that should be of interest to anyone interested in the modern world and how it was shaped."